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THE ALTA CALIFORNIA SUPPLY
SHIPS, 1773-76

BY

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THE ALTA CALIFORNIA SUPPLY SHIPS, 1773-76

CHARLES E. CHAPMAN

Historians have been prone to regard the expeditions of 1769 to Alta California¹ as accomplishing permanent occupation of that region by Spain, simply because uninterrupted possession thenceforth ensued. A little reflection upon the failure of many promising attempts in previous centuries to found colonies in the Californias, or, indeed, wherever colonization has been undertaken, might lead to a conjecture that Alta California must have had its period of uncertainty, and a study of the documents would prove the conjecture true.

Climate and natural resources were not enough to keep civilized men alive, however well the numerous Alta California Indians were able to subsist. Everything that the Spaniards needed had to come from Mexico, or in many cases from Spain itself. Alta California was a land without manufactured articles of any sort, from guns and powder down to nails and fish-hooks, without agriculture, without domestic animals, without laborers, without white women. All there was, was the tiny garrison of soldiers and a few missionaries. All supplies had to come from the port of San Blas, Mexico, even food, for the colonists could not subsist on acorns and chance supplies of bear-meat. There were difficulties with the long sea-route from San Blas, especially as regards transport of animals and settlers, so that overland routes were temporarily made use of, but as regards food-supplies, goods, and effects, the San Blas supply-ships were for many years practically the only reliance of Alta California, without which the province would almost certainly have been abandoned. In 1770 and again in 1772 the province was barely saved by the timely arrival of supply-ships. The same thing was to occur for the third time in 1774.

It is the purpose of this article to deal only with Bucarely's²

¹In this article "Alta California" will be used for the region from San Diego to San Francisco, "Baja California" for the peninsula, and "Californias" where both are meant.

²Antonio Maria Bucarely y Ursúa was viceroy of New Spain from 1771 to 1779, and was one of the greatest rulers that land ever had.

activities in regard to the supply-ships from the middle of 1773 to the close of 1776, a period embracing the great famine of 1774, and Bucarely's measures to prevent its recurrence, in the face of a development of the province calling for increased supplies.³

In 1768 a town was founded by José de Gálvez at the port of San Blas to serve as a base of supplies, not only for Baja California, but also for Alta California, which Gálvez was already planning to occupy. In the first years of the occupation, but one ship a year was required for Alta California. Writing to Arriaga,⁴ June 26, 1773, of the departure of the *San Carlos* with provisions for San Diego and Monterey, Bucarely announced that he planned to send another ship in November, although he understood that the Californias were already well provided with supplies.⁵ A month later, July 27, 1773, he wrote at some length of new arrangements that he had made for such voyages. The difficulty of navigation from the mainland to both Alta and Baja California⁶ had caused him to seek a remedy. From reports made to him he had learned that December or the beginning of January was the best season for a voyage to Monterey, that all the year except from April to the middle of June was suitable for voyages to San Diego, and that all the year, but especially January, was favorable for voyages to Loreto. San Blas was too hot and damp for storage of maize (which formed the principal part of supplies for the Californias), without exposing it to risk of damage. As crops were gathered in January, it would be best to put them aboard direct. Other effects could be gathered beforehand. Bucarely

³Materials for this article were found mainly in the Archivo General de Indias at Seville, Spain. Copies of several documents in the Museo Nacional of Mexico have also been used, as also Palou, *Noticias* (San Francisco. 1874), and *Vida* (Mexico. 1787).

⁴Julián de Arriaga was minister for the Indies (*ministro general de Indias*) in Spain from 1751 to 1776.

⁵A. G. de I., 104-6-14. Approved in Arriaga to Bucarely, Oct. 13, 1773. *Ibid.*

⁶Documents on this point are legion. Two easily accessible references are the following: Gálvez, *Informe* (Mexico, 1767), 141-47; Bancroft, *North Mexican States and Texas*, I (San Francisco. 1889). One has only to note the many voyages across the Gulf of California mentioned in the latter to get an understanding of the difficulties, which were in some respects even greater on the long voyage to Alta California. In brief, these difficulties were the result of having small ships, uncharted coasts, severe storms, prevalence of scurvy, lack of skilled officers, and inferior crews.

had given orders in accord with these conclusions, making provision also that boats should leave San Blas in January, if possible, or early in February at latest. This was to be not only for the year 1774, but for ensuing years as well.⁷

For these reasons and also because of Bucarely's belief that the Californias had abundant supplies, the November ship was not sent. Writing to Arriaga, September 26, 1773, Bucarely said that the *San Carlos* had been unable to make the voyage to Alta California on account of the storms that it encountered in attempting to round Cape San Lucas. Having lost its rudder and sprung a leak, it put in at Loreto, discharged its cargo there, and returned to San Blas for repairs. This would have caused him anxiety over the needs of Alta California, had it not been that the pilots and the commissary, Campo, informed him that Governor Barry had offered to supply the northern establishments by land with as much as they needed. Moreover, he had heard from Fages that they already had enough to last for the rest of the year 1773.⁸ Shortly afterward Bucarely was confirmed in his belief that all was going well by a letter from Father Verger* announcing progress in Alta California, saying that crops were good, and that many conversions were being obtained.⁹ This news Bucarely in turn transmitted to Arriaga, November 26, 1773.¹⁰

On January 27, 1774, Bucarely wrote to Arriaga that Pérez was only awaiting a favorable wind to set sail in the *Santiago* on his voyage of exploration to the northwest. Francisco Hijosa, now commissary at San Blas, had written to him on January 5 that the boat was provisioned for a year, in addition to supplies that it was carrying to Monterey. Bucarely thought that the *Santiago* must have sailed since that time. In order to provide for every possible contingency he had ordered the *Príncipe* promptly to San Diego and Monterey with more provisions.¹¹ On

⁷A. G. de I., 104-6-14. Approved in Arriaga to Bucarely, Dec. 12, 1773. *Ibid.*

⁸A. G. de I., 104-6-15.

*Verger was Father Superior of the Franciscan College of San Fernando, Mexico. The missionaries of Alta California were sent out by this college, and were subject to it.

⁹Verger to Bucarely, Nov. 5, 1773. A. G. de I., 104-6-14.

¹⁰A. G. de I., 104-6-14.

¹¹A. G. de I., Estado. Aud. Mex. 1, Doc. 7.

April 26, 1774, he was able to announce that the *Príncipe* had sailed the month before on March 21. It had been delayed for repairs necessitated by the size of the cargo that it was to carry; not only was it to bear supplies for the missions and presidios of Alta California, but also a copious store for the *Santiago*, in case that boat should be obliged to put back from its northwestward voyage, or for its use when it returned. Bucarely had ordered repairs to be made promptly, so that the *Príncipe* might sail before the season of good weather should pass. Hijosa's letter of March 24 telling of its departure reported it to be laden with as much provisions as it could carry; so Bucarely felt sure that there would be enough to supply Alta California for many months, and to help Pérez's expedition, if needed.¹² In forwarding Palou's report of December 10, 1773, on the status of the Alta California missions, Bucarely wrote Arriaga, May 27, 1774, that he was much pleased with the progress of conversions, and manifested a belief that much more might be expected, since the natives were so numerous and the lands so fertile. The greatest obstacle had been lack of provisions with which to maintain Indians at the missions during the period of instruction. This lack should be alleviated in a measure by the provisions in the *Santiago* and *Príncipe*, as also by the crops of Alta California. Anxiety of the missionaries should be relieved by the arrival of Serra, for he had been told that the needs of the missions would be supplied.¹³ In another letter to Arriaga of the same date, Bucarely stated that he had ordered a new keel laid at San Blas, because it was too great a risk to rely upon one frigate and two packet-boats for the Alta California voyages, as was being done.¹⁴ It may be observed that the Palou memorial had not spoken of the danger of famine, though emphasizing the need for supplies. We may now glance at the actual state of affairs in Alta California in late 1773 and early 1774.

While Bucarely rested secure in the belief that Barry would forward to Alta California the provisions which the *San Carlos* had left at Loreto, in fact no such thing had happened, for lack of means to convey them. As a result the new establishments

¹²A. G. de I., 104-6-15.

¹³A. G. de I., 104-6-15.

¹⁴A. G. de I., 104-6-15.

had to endure the worst famine of their history, lasting eight months, during which time milk had to serve as the principal aliment of the colony.¹⁵ At length Juan Pérez, in the *Santiago*, reached San Diego, March 13, 1774, and was able to leave provisions enough to tide over the situation until arrival of the *Príncipe*. Other missions had to wait several weeks longer, until provisions could be distributed from San Diego and Monterey, to which latter port Pérez arrived on May 9. To make clear just how serious were the straits to which the settlements had been reduced, it will be well to quote some documents of the period. Writing from San Gabriel, April 10, 1774, Anza, who had just explored a route to Alta California from Sonora, told Bucarely that he had found a shortage of rations at that mission, although accounted the richest site in Alta California. Herbs and three *tortillas* apiece were the daily ration of the inhabitants.¹⁶ Anza was himself in great need of provisions, but was able to get little at San Gabriel.¹⁷ He therefore sent to San Diego and procured a supply, the *Santiago* being still at that port.¹⁸ Other references might be given to show equally bad conditions as regards food supply at other missions less well favored by nature than was San Gabriel.¹⁹ Nor was want in Alta California solely a matter of food. This appears, for example, in letters of Father Lasuén of San Gabriel to Franciscans at the college of San Fernando. Lasuén had hoped to return there, but was resigned to staying in Alta California, if required to do so. He begged to be relieved, however, from the great hardship that he was suffering for lack of wearing apparel, which had already reached the point of indecency. His clothes had been in continuous use for more than five years. He had mended them until they no longer admitted of it, besides which he no longer had materials for sewing.²⁰ In another letter of

¹⁵Palou, *Vida*, 153.

¹⁶A. G. de I., 104-6-15.

¹⁷Palou, *Noticias*, III, 158, says that an animal was killed to provide Anza with meat, but that the mission could give him nothing else.

¹⁸Valdés, *Declaration*, June 14, 1774, A. G. de I., 104-6-15; Anza, *Diary*, April 6, to May 27, 1774, A. G. de I., 104-6-15.

¹⁹Eg. Palou, *Vida*, 158; *Noticias*, III, 148; correspondence and diaries of Anza, Díaz, and Garcés of the Anza expedition.

²⁰Lasuén to the Father Superior of San Fernando, April 23, 1774. Mus. Nac., Doc. rel. mis. Cal., v. II.

the same date, April 23, 1774, Lasuén repeated the story of his needs. Perhaps it was on that account, he said, that the Indians cared for him so much, on the principle that like attracts like, for he resembled them much in scantiness of wardrobe.²¹ Writing a general letter to his brethren of San Fernando, May 2, 1774, Lasuén said that Fathers Garcés and Díaz of the Anza expedition had given him clothing, which would cover his nudity for several months; the former gave him a thin flannel undergarment and cowl, and the latter a tunic and pair of sandals.²²

Two letters from Rivera²³ to Bucarely, June 16, 1774, show a lack of military equipment and other necessities at the presidios. In one of these letters he wrote that the forces at San Diego were in need of thirty shot-guns, twenty small swords, twenty knives, two cases of powder, one case of balls, one case of munitions, and two packs of tobacco. Monterey required twenty small swords, twenty knives, two cases of balls, one case of munitions, two of powder, and thirty shot-guns. He wanted the shot-guns examined before they were sent, to make sure that they were good.²⁴ In the other letter he complained that things forwarded from San Blas were not suited to the needs of the colony. Articles asked for were not sent, leaving them entirely lacking in some things that they needed, and for which they had no other recourse, as for example, clothing. They sent no corduroy, which the soldiers liked to use because of its durability; they had not sent a cake of soap; nor a handful of tobacco. There was great need for shot-guns and small swords. Some soldiers entirely lacked arms; others had the gun but not the sword, and vice versa.²⁵

Rivera's petitions were considered in connection with authorization of a second Anza expedition, and Lasuén's were a matter between him and his college. The general scarcity, however, especially in food supplies, was met by the arrival of the *Santiago*, followed a little later by the *Príncipe*. Thenceforth, Alta Cali-

²¹Lasuén to Pangua, April 23, 1774. *Ibid.*

²²Lasuén to Franciscans of San Fernando, May 2, 1774. *Ibid.*

²³Rivera succeeded Fages in 1773 as civil and military ruler of Alta California.

²⁴In *Testimonio . . . sobre la segunda expedicion . . . qe. por tierra ha de hacer . . . Anza*. A. G. de I., 104-6-16.

²⁵In *Ibid.*

fornia did not again suffer in that respect.²⁶ Her relief had come not only from Bucarely's foresight in sending the well-filled *Santiago* and the *Príncipe*, in the face of favorable reports as to the situation in Alta California, but also because Bucarely never allowed a relapse, once he got actual information of the state of affairs there. On this point we may revert again to Bucarely's correspondence.

As already noted, Bucarely learned from Anza of the scarcity of provisions in Alta California. Writing to Arriaga, August 27, 1774, he opined that the cargoes of the *Santiago* and *Príncipe* would relieve the immediate need. He realized that the question of supplies was one of considerable importance, as the ports of Alta California might serve to shelter and assist boats engaged in northward exploration. It would be of great advantage to the royal treasury if the inhabitants might be given the means of sustaining themselves by their own industry. Hijosa, the commissary at San Blas, had been ordered repeatedly to gather provisions for their aid. To this end he was then repairing two boats, which were to sail within a short time, one after the other.²⁷

A month later Bucarely was able to say that Alta California's extreme need had been successfully met. The provisions of the *Santiago* had reached Alta California in time to relieve the sufferings of the missions, but they would not have done so, had it not been for the successful voyage of the *Príncipe*, which reached Monterey June 8, three days before the *Santiago* sailed. These provisions and the fertility of the soil combined would thenceforth ensure permanence of the colonies and lead to further conquests. Such conquests would be easy because of the docility of the Indians, if there were provisions enough to furnish them, for in that lay their attraction to vassalage and knowledge of the faith. Rivera and Serra²⁸ reported that all were content. The *Príncipe* got back to San Blas on August 30. Bucarely had acquiesced in repairs proposed by Hijosa, tending to protect provisions from water, because he realized the importance of sending supplies to Alta California, not only for its own subsistence, but

²⁶Palou, *Vida*, 158-59.

²⁷A. G. de L., 104-6-15.

²⁸Junfpero Serra was Father-President of the Alta California missions.

as stores for Pérez, in case of accident. He had therefore suggested to Hijosa that he repair another ship and send the two with provisions in the coming January.²⁹

Bucarely's plans matured, so that by February 1, 1775, the *Príncipe* left San Blas with provisions for San Diego. Because of severity of storms it took seventy days to make the voyage, whereas the return occupied but thirteen, May 9 to 22. Quirós, the commander, reported that he saw the Indians of a whole village who had come to San Diego to ask for baptism, but it was denied them because there were not provisions enough to sustain all. It was believed, however, that the crops would be sufficient for their maintenance despite the scant rainfall at San Diego, thus permitting of Christian instruction.³⁰ The *San Carlos* under Manrique had tried to leave with the *Príncipe*, being destined for Monterey with provisions, but ran aground in the port of San Blas itself. After getting her free, the officials of San Blas wished to unload, in order to see what damage the boat had suffered, which would hold back the voyage until March. Bucarely ordered that it be reladen with provisions for the families who were to go with Anza to found a settlement at San Francisco, and that the rest be left for the *Santiago*, in case there should be room for them in addition to those to be carried for its own crew in the new voyage of discovery that it was about to make. On February 24, 1775, the date of his letter to Arriaga, Bucarely had not yet heard whether such an arrangement was possible.³¹ The *San Carlos* was in fact delayed until March 16, 1775, but on that day set sail, accompanied by the *Santiago* and *Sonora*, which were to make further explorations of the far northwest. This time, the voyage of the *San Carlos* was a success, for it delivered the provisions consigned to Monterey, was employed in exploration of San Francisco Bay, and at length returned to San Blas.³²

In 1776 new problems began to arise in connection with the

²⁹A. G. de I., 104-6-17.

³⁰Bucarely to Arriaga, June 26, 1775. A. G. de I., 104-6-16.

³¹A. G. de I., 104-6-16. This letter states that the *Príncipe* had left on January 31. In Bucarely to Arriaga, June 26, 1775, A. G. de I., 104-6-16, it is given as February 1. Bancroft, *Cal.*, I, 241, says that the *San Antonio* or *Príncipe* left San Blas on March 16. This is an error.

³²Bucarely to Arriaga, Nov. 26, 1775. A. G. de I., Estado, Aud. Mex., 1, Doc. 19.

supply-ships, as a result of the increased needs of Alta California. The *San Carlos* and *Príncipe* had sailed on March 10, wrote Bucarely on the 27th, fully laden with provisions. Yet, some of the supplies needed at the missions and presidios had had to be left behind. Another boat was needed.³³

The problem was accentuated by receipt of orders for a fresh series of northwestward exploring voyages.³⁴ In reply August 27, 1776, Bucarely stated his belief that such a voyage would be impossible before December, 1777. The *Santiago* was the only serviceable boat then at San Blas, the *San Carlos*, *Príncipe*, *Concepción*, and *Sonora* being absent on provision voyages, the two former to Alta, and the two latter to Baja California. Also, a boat was necessary for Areche, the viceroy's *fiscal*, who had been appointed *visitador* to Peru. Alta California had developed to such an extent that the *Santiago* was needed as an additional supply-ship. The two boats then in use had been obliged to leave behind many effects for which the missionaries were clamoring. Hecetá and Bodega were eager to make the new expedition, but the first thing to do was to hold what had already been occupied.³⁵ A month later, Bucarely again referred to the uncertain status of the proposed voyages for 1777. He had arranged for calling a *junta* at San Blas to determine what boats were to be used for supplying Alta California and carrying Areche to Lima. He suggested that two new frigates be built at Guayaquil.³⁶ The *junta* concluded that voyages of exploration should be postponed for a year. At least two boats were needed on such voyages, it held, but it was impossible to get them, because of the necessity of getting Areche to Lima and supplies to Alta California.³⁷

Some indication of the increased needs of Alta California appears in a Bucarely letter of November 26. A settlement had been made at San Francisco with the recruits and their families

³³A. G. de I., 104-6-17.

³⁴Gálvez to Bucarely, May 20, 1776, A. G. de I., Estado, Aud. Mex., I, Doc. 22. Gálvez had succeeded Arriaga upon the death of the latter in January.

³⁵A. G. de I., 104-6-18.

³⁶Bucarely to Gálvez, Sept. 26, 1776 A. G. de I., 104-6-17.

³⁷A. G. de I., 104-6-18. Enclosed in a letter of Arteaga to Gálvez, Nov. 23, 1776.

brought from Sonora by Anza.³⁸ Twenty-five more soldiers had been sent to Alta California in consequence of an Indian outbreak at San Diego, and a few sailors had been left by the *Príncipe*. The province might thus be considered to have advanced and become better guarded, but this had also made necessary the shipment of increased stores of supplies, until such time as the soil should provide enough to relieve the royal treasury. Rivera had failed to pay attention to agricultural development of the province; otherwise, there might have been crops enough to sustain the settlers.³⁹

Meanwhile, the boat shortage had been cleared up by the chance arrival at Acapulco of the merchant ship *Fenix*, coming from Guayaquil. Areche could go to Peru in that, wrote Bucarely on December 27, as also a naval officer to solicit a frigate there for use in the projected exploration. This expedition had been suspended, however, until 1778, as scarcity of boats was still a factor. Bucarely then recounted various measures by which he planned to hasten supplies to Alta California. But for the arrival of the *Fenix*, it would have been difficult to send enough. As matters were, the *Santiago* could replace the smaller *San Carlos* and with the aid of the *Príncipe* could perhaps carry all the provisions required. If it seemed necessary, however, Bucarely would also send the *San Carlos*, so that the province might be less embarrassed in 1778 when the exploring voyages were to take place. At all events, it was more important to supply Alta California than to make the explorations.⁴⁰

On the same day Bucarely announced the return of the *San Carlos* from San Francisco. It brought news that the new settlement was making excellent progress, but Bucarely was not going to take any chance of a decline. He was seeking a surgeon, carpenter, mason, and smith in Mexico for that settlement, and was sending to San Blas by forced marches a quantity of clothing, tools, and other utensils for San Francisco, agricultural tools being especially abundant. Having heard that there was a scarcity of provisions at San Francisco, he had ordered the *Santiago* to

³⁸Anza brought thirty soldiers destined to remain. These and their families aggregated 246 persons.

³⁹A. G. de I., 104-6-18.

⁴⁰A. G. de I., 104-6-18.

sail direct for that port, without previous stop at San Diego or Monterey.⁴¹

It is not proposed to pursue this matter here. Enough has been said, it is believed, to show the great importance of the supply-ships in this period of Alta California's history, and also the great credit that is due to Bucarely for his management of what was by no means an easy task. Some recognition of this fact seems to have been accorded him in a document which otherwise deprived him of power. By a royal instruction of August 22, 1776, Gálvez instituted the new government of the *comandancia general* of the frontier provinces, including the Californias. The viceroy was to continue to supervise the sending of supply-ships.⁴² Perhaps it was well for Alta California that this was so, for the *comandancia general* was not a glittering success in other respects.

⁴¹A. G. de I., 104-6-18.

⁴²A. G. de I., 103-3-13, Exped. 5, 1776.

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